





IN A GRAIN OF SAND

“To see the world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower ;
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour.”

Blake.

NO MUNDO
AFRODISÍACO



A. MARA

IN A
GRAIN OF SAND.

YOÏ MARAINI
(YOÏ PAWLOWSKA)

Author of "A YEAR OF STRANGERS," "THOSE THAT DREAM,"
"A CHILD WENT FORTH."

With six drawings by Antonio Maraini.



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TO THE READER

IF there is any value in what I write it is because I have known Florence from a point of view rare for a stranger. The life that has interested me has not been that lived in the beautiful villas on the hills—an incomplete, cosmopolitan life such as any of the large hotels in the world can show—but I have been privileged to know something of the working people, and it is of these, chiefly, that I have written.

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JOURNAL OF
TRAVELING

BY ARNO RIVER

A row of small, modern houses, ugly, cheerful, and clean, then the road ends and a rough path begins. There is a bridge over a stream, the water splutters through an iron grating before it gets to the river; then a grass path, soft and green, where I sit and watch the boatmen pushing rubble through a wire screen to get the river sand. How brown the men look, almost naked, against the gray stones. The river bed is wide, for there has been no rain for many weeks; the water moves slowly; naked boys run in and out of the water shouting and laughing—little pink dots on the farther shore.

The houses near to this part of the river belong to working men, and a crowd of little children play on the grass watched over by their grandmothers. The

BY ARNO RIVER

grandmothers have thrown white, not too clean, handkerchiefs on their thin hair to save their heads from the rays of the sun. They stand or sit together plaiting straw for hats, talking to each other, whilst the babies toddle about. Now and then, when a child is in danger of rolling into the water, a grandmother runs up, grabs it by an arm, shouts at it, shakes it, then takes it up in her arms and loudly covers it with kisses; the child then runs away to begin once more the game it had left, and the woman goes back to her friends to grumble at the restlessness of children.

A group of these old women stand by the shade of a tree; they are toothless, wrinkled, worn out by a life of hard work—and now comes their reward. Or is it a reward for them to pass their last days in the sunshine, by a river, close to little children? Do these tiny creatures, lovely and alive, warm the hearts of these old women to a fresh joy in life, or have

BY ARNO RIVER

they worked too hard and suffered too long to have any sense left of beauty and delight? Are their hearts like their faces—wrinkled and hard and old?

A little farther on, from the opposite bank, comes the purring noise of machinery. I watch a small truck that runs up and down a narrow line, to and from a red-brick building with black-rimmed windows. All the time the purring goes on, a contented purring like that of a huge cat.

For a long time I listen lazily and then suddenly burst out laughing—I see before me the faces of pedants and merchants in old things; they would call this an eyesore. Their grumblings at modern Italy make a plaintive wail in my ears until I turn round to find it is only the cry of sheep that are being driven away from the grass.

Slowly I walk on to the ferry at Rovezzano; there by the river two large Casentino oxen stand ready to get into the ferry boat.

BY ARNO RIVER

Between their enormous horns, and falling on to their faces, hang bunches of scarlet leather tied in little knots, to save them from the evil eye. Solemn, like Assyrian monsters carved in stone, they show no sign of surprise at the new movement as the boat slowly carries them across the river.

Far away, the hills all round, like kind giants, shelter in their arms the busy working men, the old women and children, the man-created mystery of live machinery, and the beasts that have shared with man through untold ages the work of spring-time and of harvest.

LAY UP TREASURE

THE sun was pouring in at the window on to a large bed that took up nearly the whole of a small and squalid room. Merope, a woman of thirty, fat and pale, lay by the side of a fat and pale middle-aged man. Her dark, thick hair, the only well-kept thing in this room, was spread fan-wise on the pillow round her. Merope opened her eyes, sat up, and began to grumble.

“Bother that girl, she’s again forgotten to close the shutters properly.” Then in a burst of temper she shook the sleeping man.

“That fool’s forgotten to close the shutters, and I can’t go to sleep. I hate lying awake here.”

“Well, get up then and make the coffee yourself. I’ve not had a decent cup since we got a servant.”

LAY UP TREASURE

Merope slowly got up, rubbed her face with a damp towel and put on her clothes. She brushed her hair and stuck it up with a comb covered with turquoises. As she was going towards the door she saw her jewels shining on a table by the window, and walked quickly towards them. Picking up five rings all set with diamonds, she forced them on to her short, fat fingers; she then took up the rest of the shining mass and threw it into the dressing-table drawer.

Her husband had gone to sleep again, so before leaving the room Merope closed the outside shutters, shut the window, and left him in a stuffy darkness.

Their only other room, and much larger than the bedroom, was the kitchen. Here the servant slept in a corner, on a bed that in the daytime disappeared into an inlaid walnut cupboard ornamented with handles of brass. This piece of furniture gave as much pleasure to Merope's husband as

LAY UP TREASURE

Merope's jewels had, at first, given to her. He had bought the cupboard when the servant they had engaged insisted on having a proper bed to sleep in, and not only a mattress thrown on the floor, and though both Merope and her husband felt that it was useless to spend money on furniture—who would ever see it?—here was a magnificent ornament that would at any time, should they wish to sell it, bring in more money than they had given for it. Merope's husband looked at it many times during the day, and every time received condensed the sensation that the shareholders of a diamond mine would have if it were possible for them all together to gaze down the shaft from which sprang their united fortunes. He would look at the large shining handles lovingly, then at Merope's rings, her turquoise comb, her necklaces. What folly to put money into a bank! All men are thieves when the opportunity comes, and how can any

LAY UP TREASURE

one be so idiotic as to trust his savings to men who after all frankly make a living by keeping a bank. Easy way, too. You get all your neighbours to trust you with their money, then you dole it out when some one shows a piece of paper—the rest you spend as you like.

He had made his fortune during the war with a wineshop in Via dei Neri, and much to his surprise, for at first it seemed to him almost unbelievable that people could pay, without a murmur, the price he and others in his trade asked. From sheer greed, bit by bit he raised his prices, always expecting some protest, but no, what he asked he got, and before laws had been passed to stop this form of amusement he had sold the goodwill of his shop for a sum that would have meant riches to any university professor. On this money, put into a small sack and hidden in their bedroom, they lived ; the money he had made before the sale was invested in jewels.

LAY UP TREASURE

They did not leave the rooms they had lived in since their marriage, ten years before, and the only difference in their lives was an unlimited power to buy as much food as they wanted, and the possession of a servant. . . .

Merope looked at the girl as she slept, and then she looked round the kitchen. The table was as they had left it the night before, the plates unwashed, the dishes still half-filled with meat and vegetables. She was about to shout at the girl, when, shrugging her shoulders, she began herself to clear up the mess. When she had washed up a few of the plates and had thrown the unfinished food out of the window, she lighted the fire and put water on to boil; and as she fanned the red-hot charcoal she began to feel something of the delight of past days when she had taken a pride in her cooking. "How jolly it was to have something to do!" . . .

"Oh, Madonna," screamed the girl,

LAY UP TREASURE

waking from her sleep and frightened to see her mistress by the fire. "Let me do that."

Quickly she pulled on her black stockings and dropped a rough cotton dress over the chemise in which she had slept.

Merope threw the fan on to the table and sat down on a hard kitchen chair. "What a nuisance," she thought, "that girl will do everything and all wrong." But as she had to pay her, and well, she felt it was right that she should sit still and make the servant work. The momentary joy that the morning had given her was gone. She was dull and listless once more.

Later on the man came into the kitchen. He walked to the tap, washed his face and hands, and then went back again to the bedroom, saying,—

"You make the coffee, Merope, or I'll go out and get mine at a shop."

Merope looked up. Oh, yes, of course, she was going to do something again.

LAY UP TREASURE

She got the coffee-mill and began to turn the handle. Even this was better than lying in bed all the morning, and that was what her life was now, that and sitting by the half-closed shutters all the afternoon watching her neighbours, and going to a theatre or music-hall at night. It had gone on now for almost a year, and she had begun months ago to suffer boredom beyond all words. Even looking at the girl working, and scolding her, was now no longer a pleasure, and the delight she had felt at the obvious envy round her had long ago palled. She wanted to stand about in the small shops again, she wanted the people round to be friendly, to talk to her as they used to do. But she had been obliged to give up that pleasure as the younger women made rude remarks, and her husband had insisted that she should get a servant, who now had all the delight of the morning gossip. Her husband had also wanted her to live like a

LAY UP TREASURE

lady, and the morning in bed seemed to him to be a necessary part of that state. It was only during the last few days that he had begun to grumble at the way the girl kept the house and at the bad coffee that she made.

Merope poured the boiling water on to the coffee in a tin pot. How good it smelt. How pleasant to think she had made it so well.

Her husband came into the room, put the coffee into a jug full of milk, threw into that a handful of sugar, and then drank the mixture. . . .

He got up to go out.

“Where are you going?” Merope asked.

“To look at horses at Prato. There is money to be made in buying and selling them. I shan’t be back till the evening.”

He said nothing more and went out. A little later the girl took up the gaily-coloured handkerchief she used for her morning’s shopping and went out too.

LAY UP TREASURE

Merope's face got heavier and duller as the minutes passed. It was useless to do anything, the girl was there, it was her business to look after the rooms and to do the cooking. Merope went to the window and looked out; yes, there was the girl at the fruit shop opposite, nibbling at cherries and laughing with the woman who sold them. Merope at that moment hated her, she felt she had stolen from her all that she had found good and pleasant in life. She went into the bedroom to try to comfort herself with looking at her necklaces and her rings. The gold of the chains was large and shiny, but hollow and light, the diamonds seemed to get most of their sparkle from the sharp-cut lines of their settings. For the first time Merope was not satisfied. No, they were not like the jewels in Settepassi's window. Why couldn't she have something like those? And she had no pearls. Pearls made her think with envy of the butcher's wife at

LAY UP TREASURE

Porta Romana who had given ten thousand lire for a pearl necklace. That was something worth having. Her husband had made a mistake in buying most of her jewels from a count who had lost his fortune at cards, and whom he had met at the races. Possibly he wasn't a count at all. . . .

How long the morning seemed, no end to the slowly-dragging minutes ; there was nothing to look forward to either, as her husband would certainly come home very late—too late to go to a play.

Merope became more and more discontented. Her man got fun out of his money ; he went about all day long and saw people—talked with other men, probably he had even motored to Prato. For her it was enough, he thought, to sit and look at her rings or dine at a restaurant. Merope felt as if she hated both things ; the jewels were hers at the loss of gay mornings laughing and talking in her shop; and as for dinners at restaurants, she hated paying, as they

LAY UP TREASURE

did, for inferior food, and besides that, she thought that the people who sat at tables near laughed at her ; they were certainly not impressed by her chains and rings.

She threw herself on the bed and began to cry. Life was dull—dull—dull ; nothing more would ever happen again. All the life of the wineshop finished, all the anxiety —she now thought of it only as delightful uncertainty—of the ups and downs of their income, their days of struggle, days of hard work, the excitement of their growing riches, all gone, finished and done with. Merope sobbed.

Slowly the door of the bedroom opened, and a young man came in.

Merope lifted her head and was about to yell. He was quickly at her side, saying, “Don’t be a fool and lose your head. No one is going to hurt you if you keep quiet. The girl won’t come if you shout for a week—she lives with me, and you’ll not see her again in a hurry.”

LAY UP TREASURE

Merope's eyes grew wider and wider; she again opened her mouth to shout, when a handkerchief was thrust into it. Feeling she was choking, she violently shook her head from side to side.

"I'll take it out, but you must shut up or you'll get something even more unpleasant. Now then, just hand me over those nice, pretty things, and then I shall want to know where you keep your money."

He pulled the handkerchief out of her mouth.

Merope gathered her jewels together, and without a murmur handed them to him.

"Now, go, go," she whispered.

"You want me to go, my pretty one? Well, then, give me the money. I'll not go without that, and I have a good idea where it is hidden. I know it's in this room, and I'll pull the walls and floor to pieces if you don't tell me at once."

Merope made a desperate movement

LAY UP TREASURE

towards the door. For the first time the young man's pleasant and open face looked thoroughly nasty. Merope stopped. What ought she to do? What could she do? He would gag her again if she screamed, and how horrible it had been with that handkerchief in her mouth. The man held her arm in a grip. "Now, be quick," and he twisted her arm till she nearly screamed with pain.

Merope sat down heavily on the bed. "It's there," she pointed to the chest of drawers, "lift up the middle brick under that thing."

In a moment the man had the little sack of their savings in his hands. He dashed up to a shelf on which stood Merope's American clock and thrust the clock into her hands. "Stare at this for ten minutes, and if you feel like shouting before that time is up, remember there are those about that will shut you up better than I did."

LAY UP TREASURE

She heard his steps on the stone stairs as he went away.

Merope passed five of the ten minutes in a dazed state; she did not think, she did not cry. Suddenly she was filled with terror of what her husband would say, and then she thought of all that she might have done to save their fortune. He would certainly blame her, and probably knock her about. This reminded her of the days before they had grown rich; then he had often been rough with her, there was spice in life then. After he had made money she had seen so little of him, and when they were out together there were never any scenes. She wasn't pretty enough now for him to pick a quarrel with other men for looking at her. . . . When the ten minutes were over Merope had realised the change that the last half-hour had made in her life. What was the good of shouting now? There were always dozens of cases of theft in the papers, and she had never read of

LAY UP TREASURE

any one getting back anything that they had lost. She looked round her. Here was something definite to be done and at once. The girl—that devil—was not coming back. The rooms must be tidied up; she could go to the police to tell them of the robbery when she went out to do her shopping in the afternoon. Fortunately she had still five hundred lire sewn in her stays, and that would carry them on for a little time.

Merope opened the bedroom shutter—the sun poured into the room. Bang! went the cannon of midday; the bells began to ring. Merope wondered at herself, wondered why for the first time they sounded to her like the marriage bells at a cinematograph ringing for the grand wedding of a marquess to a princess. She went to a cupboard, unfolded a brightly-coloured cotton handkerchief, tied it on her head, and then went into the kitchen. Here she took up a broom and began to

LAY UP TREASURE

sweep the floor. Swish, swash. Her broom gaily kept time to the bells. The dust flew about, a golden shower in the shaft of sunlight.

A woman sewing at a window on the floor below was surprised to hear above the clang of bells the voice of Merope singing loudly.

"It's months since Merope sang," she thought. "I s'pose she's got another ring. Lord! She's lucky to be able to idle about all day. Curse these shirts, and those who ordered them to be made—sharks—and curse those who will wear them—lazy pigs of gentlemen!"

FADING LIGHTS

BEFORE the war the lights on the shores of the Arno curled clear with the bend of the river, but as the war went on fewer lamps were lit; the Arno was no longer marked by a silver line.

The Old Bridge, too, kept shuttered windows; no more could you watch the water under it and dream of sounds coming out of the depths of the silver pipes of the enormous organ that the lights once made on the water.

But the town took back its ancient form, and there was beauty in the darkness. The sloping eaves of giant palaces cut the night sky unevenly; their sombre masses stood out large and unspoilt by the goods that in the daytime hung out of the cellar-like shops of the ground floors. The people became more silent, less aggressive; they flitted

FADING LIGHTS

like bats, hurriedly, through the narrow streets.

Like one of the disused lamp-posts, you could stand and watch a world all new. No one saw you, no one disturbed you; you could live by your eyes alone and see Florence four hundred years ago.

A small hand-cart was pushed by. Dangling under it, a red paper lantern with a lighted candle made a swinging streak of ruddy flame on the flat stones of the road. A woman came out of a house holding an oil lamp; it shone upon a group of girls passing, hatless, and wrapped round with fringed black shawls. They were Venetian refugees.

Again the street was quiet; all the doors shut, all the windows barred. Noise, light, and movement in a wide road, and then suddenly a procession came near. White-robed men carrying torches walked with a coffin covered with a black pall. You followed the procession to a church in a

FADING LIGHTS

small square. The lights shone on the face of Madonna and Child frescoed on a wall outside the church. Then for a moment, as the body was carried into the church, the smoke of the torches hid the pale face of Madonna.

The white-robed men banged their torches on the ground and the lights flared up again clear and bright. The face of Madonna looked down once more in pity. Thus had she looked four hundred years ago, and thus will she look down till the walls have crumbled into dust.

CHARITY

THEY had taken away her calf, and all night long the cow had moaned in the stall. The peasants, worn out from lack of sleep—the stable was under their bedroom—got up early, and soon threw off the irritability of a bad night in hard work.

Near to the peasant's house was the smaller house of the proprietress, an old Swiss lady. Though she had lived in Italy for over forty years the patient kindness of the Italian had not entered into her blood; her life was one long fight trying to make every one round her live up to her ideals of punctuality and diligence. She, too, had been disturbed by the cow, but as it was not her habit to ring before six o'clock, she lay in the dark angrily thinking over all that had upset her in the past day.





CHARITY

The peasants had given her half the potatoes, yes, they had said half, but though her field was small they had probably got more out of it than she had seen. It was a miserable system, this division of produce; it meant for her a continual agitation of mind, wondering if she had been cheated, and how.

A clock struck six. She pulled the bell, and when after three minutes her servant had not answered, she pulled at the bell again, and this time violently. At that moment the door opened, and a tall, pretty girl came in with a cup of hot milk. Hardly had she opened the door when the old lady snapped at her, "Why didn't you come at once? You know I like you to be punctual."

"The milk was brought rather late and I waited for it to boil."

"There is always an excuse, Anina. I wish you'd remember sometimes all I have done for you."

CHARITY

Anina walked to the window and drew the curtains.

The old lady, sipping the milk, watched her.

“Pull that curtain on the right a little farther: it isn’t like the one on the other side. No—no, don’t open the window—that cow makes such a noise. I slept badly enough, and I don’t want to hear her more than I can help.”

The old lady noticed that Anina looked very pale, and for one moment thought of asking her what was the matter. She did not, however, want to be worried by hearing that the girl was tired; the work had to be done, and the girl would probably sleep all right in the coming night—the cow could not go on moaning for ever. So she said nothing, and went on sipping her milk.

Before leaving the room Anina did an unusual thing: she walked up to the bed and said, “Couldn’t you get the calf back

CHARITY

again? This cow isn't like the others—she seems to be really suffering."

The old lady was surprised—Anina never spoke unless she was asked a question.

"Goodness me, how sentimental! That's the worst of you town-bred girls: you are full of silly ideas, silly when they aren't wicked. The cow'll forget soon enough—just as you have forgotten."

Anina got very red, and in a burst of rage ran out of the room and down into the kitchen. There with both her hands she took up the first thing she saw—a large soup tureen—and smashed it on to the ground. Then she sat down on a chair, put her head on her arms on the table, and sobbed.

The old lady, hearing the noise of broken china, got into her green flannel dressing-gown, and rushed into the kitchen, to find the floor littered with her favourite dish.

"What have you done? What is all this? Careless, stupid, ungrateful girl."

CHARITY

There was no answer from Anina, who went on sobbing desperately.

"So this is how you repay me, I who took you in when your father and mother turned you out of their house, I who gave you a home! This is how you repay me, with violence, unpunctuality, and sulks."

Anina murmured, but her sobs were louder than her words.

"No—no, don't speak, there's nothing to say. You'll pay for the dish out of your wages."

Goaded into speech the girl stood up, holding her arms across her eyes.

"With the miserable bit you give me, it will mean a month's money."

"What if it does? You ought to be glad to be getting any wages at all."

With that the old lady caught at the tail of her dressing-gown and walked out of the kitchen. She was angry about the broken dish, but not so angry that she entirely forgot herself. Anina had a history, and

CHARITY

Anina had moods, but thanks to that history Anina could be kept in her place and she could be made to work. All that stood between her and the streets was the self-interest of her mistress. A strong, respectable girl could earn nowadays far more than the thrifty Swiss would care to give; moreover, she might show an independence of spirit that would flout all notions of order or punctuality, and might indeed reply to her reprimands by giving notice, which in these days would prove more disconcerting than all Anina's sulking fits. So, after all, perhaps, Anina must be forgiven. Not, that she acknowledged to herself, that she had any motive for taking Anina but kindness of heart. The girl had come of respectable people, and when she left the maternity hospital with her baby, her parents had refused to see her again, and her lover, at the mere suggestion of marriage, had taken himself off to America. So it was Christian charity

CHARITY

in her mistress to offer her a home, only making the stipulation that the baby should be sent to an institution.

The Swiss woman had long ago forgotten the terrible day when Anina had to part with her child, or if she remembered she thought of it only as one of the many disagreeable emotional scenes that Italians are apt to indulge in. Upset and angry, she dressed herself, and later on in the morning sat in the sunshine in the garden preparing to write her letters. But the cow kept on moaning, and the horrid noise disturbed her. She went into the house, put on her hat, got her books together to change at the library, and went out.

Anina had dusted the sitting-room, crying silently all the time. Whenever the cow moaned, her tears fell faster. After tidying the small entrance room, she went back to the kitchen. There, as the kitchen window faced the window of the stables, the noise was louder. Anina started to

CHARITY

clean vegetables. When she stood near to the sink the rush of water drowned all other sounds, and for a short time she stopped crying. Seeing that the charcoal fire had got low, Anina went to fan it; as she fanned she heard a long drawn-out moan. "Poor beast—how cruel it is!" Anina stopped fanning and went to the window.

It was on just such a day that they had taken away her child, and she had spent most of the day, after a terrible hour of crying on the floor, beating her head on the stones, looking half-dazed out of the kitchen window. The sun had shone then on the olives; it was shining on the olives now—and all the old pain had come back. She opened the window wider. What warm air. Was her child enjoying it; was he out of doors or shut up in one of those large, gloomy rooms doing his lessons? How little she knew about him. The rules of the institution only allowed her to

CHARITY

see him once a month, and often even on that one precious day she had not been able to visit him. Sometimes her mistress had been ill; sometimes, because of epidemics, no visitors had been allowed; sometimes he had been ill, and then children were not allowed to be upset by anxious mothers. What she had suffered then no one could know. Her mistress had once said it was a wise rule made for the sake of the children, but Anina wondered why young mothers and their agony did not count in the framing of wise rules.

In six years what few days, what short moments, what cruel partings. And that first parting of all when in the night she had groped for his little form and found, on waking to full consciousness, that he was not there. To remember was like a burning iron on her heart. It was then that she had really lost him. What was she to him now? Nothing—a visitor who came now and then for an hour and spent some

CHARITY

of that short time trying to smile through tears that would fall in spite of all her determination to be cheerful. He was not at ease with her; she could see he was relieved when at last the nun, placid and detached, came to say it was time for her to go. With what bitterness Anina envied that placid calm.

As all this passed through her mind she felt it was impossible for her to stop indoors any longer. She went out into the air, pushed through the badly-kept box hedge that separated the garden from the field, and walked up to the stables. Lying in the shade of the eaves was a heavy stone used for putting under wine casks. Anina lifted it, put it in the sun, and sat down on it. How easy it was for her to lift the stone. She felt conscious all at once of her young strength. Pushing back her sleeves, she stretched out her arms and looked at them.

“Oh, God, why hadn’t I kept him—

CHARITY

why hadn't I worked for him?" It was a bitter cry; for she had forgotten how she had been cowed and frightened and made to feel ashamed at a time when she was physically unfit to decide anything. Her mind had developed little in these years, but pain had taught her to feel less violence towards the man who had left her, and more hatred of the selfish wisdom of the old woman who had persuaded her to give up her child. At that moment she felt that she could face anything for his sake, and now it was too late, she had lost him. Charity had taken him and charity would keep him till he was sixteen—and charity did not think of the mother.

The peasant's wife carrying a load of grass on her head came round the corner of the building. With a nod she passed Anina and went into the stable. As she came out again a moment later Anina said, "Don't shut the door, the poor beast may like the sunshine."

CHARITY

The woman laughed and stopped. "The cow is fretting badly, she won't eat. I've got her this grass, hoping to tempt her." As she moved away she added, "I suppose the old lady is out for lunch; it isn't often we see you out here of a morning."

Anina did not answer; she sat still with her hands on her face and her elbows on her knees. Time passed. The cow gave a deep moan.

"Poor beast—poor suffering beast!"

Anina got up and went into the stable....

At midday the old lady was home once more. She went into the dining-room expecting to see the table ready for luncheon. The table was not laid. In the kitchen she found water running from the tap into a large green earthenware basin filled with raw cabbage.

"Anina—Anina."

No answer. The old lady began to get anxious. She walked into the garden and shouted; but there, too, she got no answer.

CHARITY

Then she pushed through the box hedge, meaning to go to the peasant's house to find out if they knew where Anina had gone; passing by the stable door she looked in. Anina stood by the cow, who was quietly munching grass that she held in her hand.

" You must be mad," shrieked the Swiss woman; " you must be mad to leave your work undone and sit about in the stables. And this is all the gratitude I get for saving you from the streets."

Anina looked straight at her; she felt she must take her mistress by the neck and strangle the nagging words in her throat. She made a step forward. The old woman, seeing the look in Anina's eyes, felt suddenly lost, confronted with passions strange and terrifying. Trembling, but with an instinct of self-protection, she said hoarsely, moving quickly away,—

" Do as you like. Perhaps you don't feel well. Do as you like. I'll go and cook an egg for myself."

CHARITY

Anina stared out of the door at the blue sky, at the olives, at the brown earth where the potatoes had been dug. These were facts in her life, these belonged to her life, and as long as she subdued every need of her youth, controlled every passion, these would still be hers, and as long as these things were hers she would be certain of seeing her child. Once she broke with all this, what might not happen to her, she who had found people cruel, love cruel, life cruel? As she looked her courage left her, she felt frightened once more. With a movement of despair she put her head down for a few minutes on to the soft neck of the animal, and then with her head bent, her arms hanging down, she went slowly back to the house.

MICK AT FOUR

ALL children are wonderful at four years old, but not many children are already artists at that age. Mick was. And that is, perhaps, why most people spoke of him as only a very naughty child, and a few, a blessed few, loved him.

He was just four when one day nurse, who was discussing with his mother some household matter, said,—

Hush ! I forgot Mick. He never misses anything.”

Mick had been very busy taking off the wheels of an engine. He looked up.

“ Yes, I does ; I misses the other sides of pictures.”

His mother said,—

“ When you are older you will imagine the other sides.”

MICK AT FOUR

"No, I don't want to 'magine them, I want to see them."

A little time after he began to take great interest in his father's studio. He watched him modelling and he puzzled about the figures that were like human beings and yet could not move nor speak. He asked his father what the statues were made of, and he heard that some were of marble and some of clay. Then he asked what people were made of. His father said in Italian, "di carne"—of flesh. Mick, in telling his nurse afterwards about this, translated "carne" into currants, and stuck to that word in spite of nurse's corrections.

A few days after he met a very tall Englishman in the street. Mick stood in front of him and stared. The man stopped and smiled at the child, but Mick was very serious.

"Are you made all, all of currants? I thought you might be made of marbolo, like the white David."

MICK AT FOUR

Mick had already christened the David near the Signoria "the white David," and the one on the Piazzale Michelangelo "the black David." He had discovered by himself that they were the same thing, though made in a different material.

Like most children with awakening intelligence, he began to take a delight in pictures, and all the books in the house, of whatever kind, were dragged on to the floor and examined. He was turning over the leaves of a large book and came to a print of one of Napoleon's generals—a very ugly man. Mick looked at it for a long time, and said at last in a voice of surprise and disgust,—

"Did he want that face?"

His nurse, not knowing what to say, turned over the page and found a picture of Marie Louise. Mick asked, puzzled,—

"Where is she now?"

"She isn't anywhere now. She lived a long time ago," was the answer he got.

MICK AT FOUR

Impatiently he at once turned over many pages till he came to a battlefield.

“ What soldiers are those ? ”

Nurse, without thinking, said, “ Germans.”

“ No, no, they isn’t Germans ; they haven’t got nails coming out of their heads.”

He then turned back to the picture of Marie Louise and looked at her. When he spoke again his voice was thoughtful.

“ She isn’t anywhere here now, not here, only in that picture,” and he quickly shut the book as if the thought did not please him.

A friend brought him a red air ball. At once he went into the garden with it and ran near to where his pigeons were walking about picking up crumbs. Mick threw the ball close to them ; the pigeons, startled, flew away.

“ Don’t frighten them, dear,” said his mother.

“ But why is they frightened ? ”

MICK AT FOUR

"Perhaps they don't like the colour of the red ball—bulls don't."

Mick looked up at the roof where the pigeons sat.

"Hasn't they never seen a red sunset?"

His mother caught him up and held him on her knee. . . .

"Show me pictures," he begged.

"But it's time for you to go to bed."

"Nurse isn't here yet, and besides . . ." his eyes wandered round till he saw a spider's web, and wishing to keep up a conversation and thus put off the bed hour, he asked quickly,—

"Would you like to be in a spider's web?"

"No, I shouldn't."

"Does a spider really eat a fly?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because he is made so."

Mick spoke indignantly,—

MICK AT FOUR

“He isn’t *made*, he grows; but I could make an egg like hens does—with milk and yellow paint.”

“They wouldn’t stick together.”

“Yes, they would. I’d seccotine them all round.”

At that moment his father came in.

“If you start a discussion with Mick now, nurse will never get him to bed. He has an answer for everything.”

Mick began to coax.

“But I don’t want to go to bed. I love, love mummy.”

“Do you love her as much as Matilda?” asked his father, laughing.

Matilda was a little American girl, a dear friend of Mick’s.

“Oh, no. I love Matilda more than any one—much more than the real world. The world is inside the round how much I love Matilda.”

Mick heard nurse’s step on the stone stairs. He at once started a new subject.

MICK AT FOUR

“Are you perfect, mummy?”

His mother got red—what ought she to say? Ought he to think that grown-up people were perfect, or was this the moment to begin to be frank with him? But Mick did not wait for an answer, he hurried on to say,—

“I am going to be perfect the day before Christmas.”

“So you can be good if you like,” said his father.

“It’s very, very difficult, because I can’t be like grown-up people yet: my legs run away with me. Matilda is perfecter than me—she can’t run so fast.”

A week or so after this talk of perfection, Mick, anything but perfect, was found by his mother standing on a small table throwing down rose leaves from a large bowl of roses. Frightened to speak in case he should fall off the table, his mother waited. Mick smiled complacently.

“I am Christ in heaven throwing down

MICK AT FOUR

haloes to the little children on earth. They must put them on and pretend they are saints."

For the rest of that day, and after a smack, Mick was more humble.

The day after he was still puzzled by the Scriptures. He was playing with snails, and sat on the grass watching ten snails that he had found in the box hedges.

"I hope you are not hurting those little creatures?" asked his mother.

"Oh, no," answered Mick, looking up with the expression of an angel. "I was very kind to them. I didn't put crowns of thorns on their heads, and I didn't crucify them as Christ was."

The snails were put into a basket and given to an old peasant woman. Mick, who did not know that they were useful for anything else but to walk in a dignified way across his garden path, was horrified when the woman thanked him and said,—

MICK AT FOUR

"They will make a nice little bit of a dinner for me."

He turned on her.

"You eat my little snails, you eat their houses, eat all the world of my little snails? No—no—no." And the snails had to be given back to him to be put once more into the hedges.

Mick at four was only quiet when he slept or when some one told him a story. He would listen for hours to any kind of story, but he liked best the stories of islands and far-away countries. He found an atlas and spent much of his time looking at the maps. He could mark out the north-west passage, and knew by name some of the smaller Greek islands. Islands, though, puzzled him. He wanted to know,—

"Do islands grow bigger when ships get closer to them?"

He must have seen them in his mind as dots on a huge sea.

Fairy stories pleased him when they were

MICK AT FOUR

about witches, but chiefly because of the delicious feeling of comfiness and fear mixed together that the thought of witches meant. He explained this by,—

“One isn’t frightened of thunders, or dragons, or witches, but one likes to be close to peoples when one is thinking of them.”

• • • • •

One summer afternoon he was playing on the steps of the statue of David on the Piazzale when a soldier in an Italian uniform sat down near to him. Mick’s mother walked up and down, and once called out,—

“Do take care, baby, the steps are slippery.”

The soldier jumped up and said to her in English,—

“You speak English.”

Mick at once ran up, and the soldier turned to him.

“Well, sonny, I left behind me at

MICK AT FOUR

Glasgow just such another little boy as you."

"I am four." Mick spoke with dignity.

"My boy is four, too."

Mick's mother here put out her hand.

"I am glad to meet some one who speaks English. But, your uniform . . ."

"Well, I had always thought I was English till this war broke out, and I found I was an Italian by birth. I am sure I don't know how I should get on here if it wasn't for the men who have come from America. I can't speak a word of Italian. My wife and child are still at Glasgow," he added.

Mick walked home full of plans for writing to the little boy to come and see his father in Italy. He said the father looked sad without his boy. For many days he hunted for the soldier, but never saw him again. That was Mick's first grief of the war. His second and his most real sorrow was when he went to see his father off for

MICK AT FOUR

the front. After the train had gone he and his mother walked home together. On the way they were both very silent. At last his mother said,—

“ We must comfort each other now.”

“ How can I comfort you ? ” was Mick’s answer. “ I can’t comfort myself.”

That day at lunch a beautiful red apple was given to him. He pushed it away,—

“ I can’t eat apples : they tastes so sad.”

• • • • •

It was on the eve of his fifth birthday—and there we must leave him to do his growing up without anxious eyes taking notes—that Mick said, looking at the search-lights exploring the night sky,—

“ Nice things sometimes become terrible, but terrible things are always terrible. This war will be terrible when there isn’t any more this war.”

MIST

AN avenue of bay trees led up to the house that stood on the top of a small hill. Often at night when a cloud hung over Florence it reflected the lights of the town on to the white walls. The house then detached itself from the trees surrounding it and became luminous and ghostly. It looked as if, should any one try to push through the door, all would melt into mist and disappear.

But one night, a full summer moon, low in the sky and behind the house, hid it in the shadow of the trees. There was no light in any window; all was dark and silent, though now and then the aspens trembled as if whispering. Slowly a cloud covered the moon. A woman stood still and looked at the darkness. The house, when it was misty and gray, frightened

MIST

her, but still it was there in front of her, she could pass through the luminous walls into the heavy gloom indoors, touch familiar things and look out at the distant lights of the town.

But now, suppose that now the house with all it held had disappeared, and she had to walk on and on, seeking, and never finding it? It might well be so, nothing in life is too incredible.... She dared not move. It might indeed be true that all was lost to-day, and strong walls as much past and done with as yesterday and yesterday's hopes. And even if they were there and only hidden; yet, in a few years they would inevitably become something strange. Why care so much when all that is visible and loved must go with the mist that is driven away by the sun?

The moon was once more free of clouds. Inside the house a light was turned up. The door opened, she ran towards it, went in and shut it after her. Quickly she went

MIST

upstairs into a large room; there a night-light was burning on a high table. In two small beds, close together, two children lay sleeping. And in the moonlit void of a wide open window the face of a third child looked into the room. For one moment the past was gathered into the present, the future was safe with the past, nothing was lost, nothing was hopeless, and nothing without meaning.



CHANCE

THERE is no need to hunt for the marvellous: every new day brings something to wonder at. We can never get used to beauty nor to the unexpected that daily crosses our path; no one can walk twice in the same road, the light of the day is different, we are blinded by our thoughts, or we see more clearly from a newer understanding.

One day I saw the red tram roar down the avenue in a swirl of gold leaves, like a monster that is bursting out of its cave of gold. Every autumn the leaves fall; every autumn the red tram runs down amongst the falling gold; but every time I see a different thing, for even the tram takes on another look from the face of the man who is guiding it.

There are days, though, when the very air weighs you down. Oh, that deadly

CHANCE

stretch of road! How you hate Florence and everything in it! Oh, for high mountains, fresh air, no people, no houses! You walk on grumbling and see nothing. And then, in front of you on the wall of a house, you find, rudely scratched in charcoal, "Evviva la Francia eroica." How could you have thought people hateful? There —there some one has written something to make you shout with joy. No, Florence is not bound up selfishly only in her own affairs. Some one has felt the glory and heroism of France.

It was in a mood of discouragement, expecting nothing from the day, that I hunted for a number in Via Cavour. At last I found it on the side door of a beautiful building. There was a long, steep staircase in front of me with walls on both sides. I climbed up and up till at last I found a door. I pulled a bell; it made a feeble noise on the other side of the door. No one came. The place was closed and silent;

CHANCE

it seemed as if life itself had become a long, steep stair with walls on either side, waiting at doors that never opened. There were four stone steps leading up to a window. I climbed them, opened the window and looked over the tops of all the houses straight at the green hill of Fiesole. After a few minutes I climbed down again and once more rang the bell. The door opened and a child's face looked at me. He walked down a long corridor, and I followed him into a room, where his mother was sewing. We talked a little, and then she asked if I would like to see the view from her windows. From the bedrooms a sea of old red-tiled roofs showed up the green of the distant hills, and I became like one whose body was in a town, but whose heart felt only the country. These were pleasant rooms to live in. We went into the kitchen, where a large copper saucepan stood on the charcoal fire. Then I walked to the window.

CHANCE

On films and on the stage if people wished to express the surprise I felt, they would rub their eyes and turn round with their mouths wide open and their eyes rolling.

“ You are surprised ? ” asked the woman, though I had done none of these things.

“ I am, indeed ! ”

Below the window in a wide court-yard, stone paved, about thirty men were standing silently gazing up at an enormous window, wide open, like the stage of a theatre. Inside the window, and facing the court-yard, was a long, green baize-covered table, and there, also facing the window, sat three men. At each end of the table stood a man, and at one end, and nearer to the window, were two beautifully-made eighteenth century walnut pillars finished on the top with delicate ornaments in brass. Between these pillars there was a large oblong ball made of brass wire. Near to the pillars stood a small boy—grinning—

CHANCE

and by the boy a man. As I looked, the man on the right hand side of the table held up a piece of paper with a number on it, and gave it to man number two sitting at the table. He, after wrapping it up, gave it to man number three, who wrapped it up even tighter and handed it to man number four. This man put it into a little steel ball and gave it to man number five. Man number five gave it to the boy, who then put it into the wire ball. And man number six turned a handle till all the balls tumbled and jumbled about together. Then the whole thing began all over again, and this went on till the first man held up number ninety, and the woman said,—

“ That is the last number.”

“ What does it all mean ? ” I asked.

The woman laughed.

“ I expected you to say that,” she said.
“ It’s the drawing of the lottery, and it’s done every Saturday. I don’t suppose

CHANCE

that a hundred people in Florence, apart from the men standing there, and they are those who keep the lottery offices, have ever seen this, though any one can go into the court-yard and see from there what you have seen. The middle man at the table is supposed to be the Prefect, but probably he is not always there."

At that moment the boy was blindfolded.

"The boy," explained the woman, "is always a different one, brought from some other charitable institution. He is given five lire, but is no doubt more pleased with the outing and the moment's importance than with the money."

The balls were for the last time rolled about violently; the boy put his hand into the large ball, brought out a little steel ball, and put it on to a plate on his head. A man took the plate and handed it to the Prefect, who opened the ball, took out the piece of paper and held it up for all to see.

CHANCE

It was then put into a frame facing the court-yard. This had happened five times, showing the five winning numbers. The men waiting in the court-yard took notes, and when the last number was put out they walked leisurely away.

KITCHEN GOSSIP

A LETTER had come from Alberto saying that he had married Gioconda, but that things were not going well with them, as the war had driven all the foreign artists away from Rome. Could he come to cook for us? Gioconda, he suggested, could easily learn to do housework.

Servants were scarce, and we had known Gioconda and Alberto, both Roman models, for years. Alberto was clever enough to do anything he wanted to do, so when he offered himself as cook we never doubted but that his cooking would be good. As for Gioconda, I had already learnt something about housework, and I could teach her what I knew.

In the afternoon of a warm spring day they arrived, looking rather tired, not very tidy, carrying all they possessed in two
60



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100
100

KITCHEN GOSSIP

small paper parcels. We were delighted to see them and to hear Roman voices again. They set to work, and for a week after Alberto started in his new profession we lived on fried fish, fried eggs, fried vegetables, and fried meat. Looking back on that terrible week, it seems that even the soup must have been fried soup. Alberto fried as only an Italian can fry, but a week of fry and fry smell was more than enough. We asked him if he could boil something for a change.

"Oh, no, I can only fry, and Tuscan oil is the best for frying. Don't you like it? Who wants to eat tasteless, boiled stuff?"

We tried to explain, without hurting his feelings, that for the next year or two we would prefer the plainest boiled egg to anything fried, and asked him to find a cook to teach him to boil and bake. Alberto was bored with the idea of hunting about for a cook to teach him, so said at once he knew of no such cook—all his friends

KITCHEN GOSSIP

fried. After that, I bought a copy of Mrs. Beeton, determined that I would learn to cook, and at the same time gave Alberto the famous Italian book called *The Art of Good Eating*.

I began with a study of rice puddings, and at half-past nine the next morning I was sitting by the marble-topped table with Mrs. Beeton in front of me. Gioconda stood watching me.

“Where’s Alberto?” I asked.

Gioconda looked as if she did not want to answer, but at last said sulkily,—

“He finds it difficult to get up.”

“Is he still in bed, then?”

“Well, you see, he is used to sleeping late, and I don’t like to wake him. He never began work before ten o’clock.”

I was too busy trying to work out the difference between English and Italian measures to take in what she had said.

“I suppose you don’t know, Gioconda, what an English pint is in Italian.”





KITCHEN GOSSIP

No, she did not, and Mrs. Beeton, too, knew nothing about it either.

"Fill up the dish," suggested Gioconda. "It can't matter much. I've never seen any one measuring out anything, and food always turns out all right."

I filled the dish with milk, and then put it into the portable oven that stood over the charcoal fire. As I put on the lid of the oven Alberto came in, sleepy and unwashed. He went to the sink and began to wash his face.

I spoke sharply.

"Alberto, that place is for washing dishes. You have got a washing basin in your room."

"Yes, but here the water is cooler."

I must have looked as cross as I felt, for, when a moment after I walked up the stairs, I heard Alberto singing in a delightful tenor, "La donna è mobile," and I felt that it was meant for me. Less than an hour later I heard loud voices in the kitchen

KITCHEN GOSSIP

—the two were certainly quarrelling. When Gioconda began to shout and scream I ran down to see what was the matter.

Alberto was standing by the table with the cookery book in front of him; Gioconda, sobbing, was cutting up vegetables with a chopper. Alberto did not see me. He muttered, giving a hard dig at Gioconda with the rolling pin,—

“Careless, stupid fool.”

“What are you doing, Alberto?” I asked.

He looked round.

“I am studying this book, and am going to make you a delicious luncheon if only this ignorant creature bustles up a bit to help me.”

“Couldn’t you do it with a little less noise? I thought that Gioconda was hurt.”

“She’s not hurt; she shouts if I only look at her. She’s frightened of me, and of course she ought to be.”

Alberto, who was slight and small, stood

KITCHEN GOSSIP

up straight and grew taller with pride. I saw that the girl, though she was taller and stronger than her husband, and could easily have knocked him down, was really frightened. It has not taken many years of life in Italy to make me suspect that fear of a husband is a subtle form of pleasure that virtuous Italian women allow themselves. Alberto put down the rolling pin and began vigorously to fan the fire, driving the dust over everything. I was thankful that my pudding was covered.

"I don't mind this work," Alberto began; "but it makes me nervy to have stupid people about. Yet I must have some one to get the things together—the mixing and all the rest I do myself, as you will see."

• . • . • . • .

At one o'clock, Alberto, shaved, clean, beautiful in a white jacket, brought up luncheon. After two spoonfuls of macaroni soufflé I had to say,—

KITCHEN GOSSIP

"This is good, Alberto."

With a movement of his white-gloved hand Alberto brushed aside my compliments. "A cook in Rome said I had great talent," he remarked. "But if only this beastly war hadn't come, and I could be back in Rome again listening to the opera." Carried away by his recollections he went on, "I was very important in the claque at the Constanzi—front row gallery every time an opera was given, and nothing to do for it but to make a little noise. Those were good times indeed; I only hope that this war will finish before I get called up." Alberto walked out of the room carrying empty plates and singing.

There were days when it was useless to try to eat; he would insist on discussing music and the different ways that famous tenors sang the same passage, and he would show how one singer after another had sung it. Gioconda, too, had a good voice, though she knew nothing about music, and

KITCHEN GOSSIP

could not, like Alberto, discuss the merits of Mozart and Verdi. We often sat on the terrace listening to the sound of Italian opera from the kitchen below, and to the more drawn-out strains of popular songs from the bedrooms upstairs. But this cheerful life of song was now and then interrupted by a morning of tears. Alberto thought it his duty to use the rolling pin for work not entirely connected with the kitchen.

In the meantime I had improved in my cooking, and Alberto and I had become rivals. He, following the recipes of his book, gave daily new dishes for us to marvel at; I, with the help of my book, became quite clever at soups and sweets. People who came to see me in the morning, and wanted to talk, were made to sit in the kitchen, and Alberto and I became at last so certain of our powers that we even encouraged visitors and liked to see them. One day my friend asked Alberto if he

KITCHEN GOSSIP

had ever been out of Italy—and I thought her a little tactless when she added, “ You have such a talent for cooking—why don’t you go and make a fortune in America ? ”

Alberto sighed. “ Don’t speak to me about America. I have been there.” .

He was making a mayonnaise in a bowl that rested on ice, and for a moment, without speaking, we watched the oil dropping slowly down.

“ I had my chances,” said Alberto at last; “ but that is no country for an artist. Besides, I was too young when I went there. You can’t do much as a page boy in a young ladies’ school.”

Here I interrupted. “ Why, I thought you had always been a model.”

“ So I had been ever since I started as an infant Bacchus. But when I was about fourteen my mother was sitting for an American, and he was so certain that I could make a fortune in America that my mother sent me there.”

KITCHEN GOSSIP

"Wasn't it splendid to see New York and the skyscrapers and everything in that spacious country?" I asked him.

"I didn't see much of anything; I was taken straight to the country, and there I began at once to write home such miserable letters that my mother quickly sent money for me to come back."

"Were the people unkind to you?" asked my friend.

"No, no, they were kind enough; but I couldn't understand a word they said, and the young ladies teased me. And there was a black housemaid who frightened me...."

"But you must have seen lots of black servants."

"I did, but this one would try to kiss me. I had to barricade my door every night, and the wardrobe was rickety...."

Here I interrupted him. Many of Alberto's stories were better stopped before he reached the climax; he was always too explicit.

KITCHEN GOSSIP

“So you got safely back to Italy?”

“Yes, within six months, and when I got to Rome I swore I should never leave Italy again. America is not civilised, the people don’t know how to live; they jump about like marionettes that are only quiet when they are put in a box....”

Summer had come. The mornings were sheer delight, but Alberto looked gloomy.

“What is the matter?” we asked him.

“It’s this war—what a nuisance it is. I shall desert, I know, if I am called up. I am too young to die.” He looked like a faun who had found a dead body in a wood, and half feared that even a faun’s end might be silence and gloom.

I tried to cheer him up. “You ought to become a bersagliere: it’s such a splendid regiment.”

This pleased him, and he burst into the song of the bersagliere. The visitor of that morning was shocked, however, and

KITCHEN GOSSIP

asked in English, "How can he say that he will desert?"

"Why not? He feels now that he will, but of course he won't. He is a spoiled child, and has been one all his life. Let's hope if he is called up he'll be used as cook."

And, indeed, later on, it was as a cook that he won his medal. But that great event in the epic of Alberto's life cannot be spoken of now.

Slowly life changed; food became less good and much dearer. Alberto had from the beginning spared himself the noise and bustle of marketing by buying all he needed from a young man who had opened a restaurant near by. He, too, had been to America and had stayed there some time, coming back with many new ideas for making his tiny garden restaurant popular with tourists; but as soon as it was ready all the tourists were driven away by the war, and little by little he and his

KITCHEN GOSSIP

rosy-faced young wife lost courage and were obliged to sell the goodwill of the business for a very small sum. The new owner, a coarse, fat man, started on quite other lines and catered for a different class of person. The place no longer looked clean and cared for; dried fish in barrels stood by the outer door; the man charged what he liked, and as there were few other shops at hand, he grew richer, fatter, and redder every day and looked more aggressively contented. He refused to shop for Alberto, so Alberto was obliged himself to go to market. This meant for him living a strenuous life, and it was by these small occurrences that we began to notice the gradual disintegration of civilised life.

When marketing Alberto put everything he bought into a bag tied to the handle of his bicycle, and when he laid his morning's shopping on the table, each object by itself, it seemed as if the bag must have been a

KITCHEN GOSSIP

magic one to have held all that he produced from it.

One morning Gioconda, hearing the bicycle bell, ran down to the kitchen. Alberto was very late, and she had been suffering from a fit of jealousy, the usual kind neighbour having told her that Alberto met a woman every day at the market. She stood by the door with her head tied up in a yellow handkerchief, showing off her clear-cut Roman features and her slow smile. Alberto, pushing the bicycle, walked up the rise lot and cross. He was annoyed to notice, when he put his head in at the kitchen door, that a number of pans had been used that he would have to clean. He shouted to Gioconda, "What are you doing here? Go upstairs and do your work." Gioconda, outwardly patient, walked slowly away.

"Do speak more kindly to her, Alberto," I said to him, feeling sorry that by having used the pans for a chocolate

KITCHEN GOSSIP

pudding I had brought his anger upon his wife.

"She should keep her place," he snapped. I took a pear from those that Alberto had brought from the market, and went after Gioconda. She was standing in the next room crying like a scolded child. The pear seemed to comfort her—she bit at it eagerly as she started to go upstairs.

I went back to the kitchen. Alberto was peeling potatoes, and, free of the necessity of having to impress his wife, he became cheerful and talkative.

As he moved about, water from an overfull jug fell on to his white shoes; he went across the kitchen for a duster and dabbed at the shoe with it. "These shoes were the pride of my life," he said. "They are getting worn-looking now—let's hope the master has a pair ready for me. But these were beauties. They were given me by an American artist, and quite new, as they were too small for him. I was sitting for

KITCHEN GOSSIP

him when he gave them to me, and I wore them every day then, and bought the very best English whitening for them, and, my word, they did look nice. As I didn't have time to clean them before I went to the studio I put the whitening on them when I took off my clothes to sit. Then I put them on the ledge of the window to dry, but I tied a long string to each shoe in case any one on the road outside should try to reach up and steal them. I was a naked Ganymede, and, as I said, I watched the strings carefully. One day, suddenly, a string danced upwards and disappeared; in a second I was on the window-sill looking out. A shout of laughter from about a dozen boys and girls was hurled at me from below—the imps had taken the shoe, hoping I would jump up—and so I did indeed."

.

Alberto and Gioconda had only been with us four months when we heard that Alberto's

KITCHEN GOSSIP

class would be called up, very much earlier than we had expected. Alberto said he would not go away to die without spending at least a month more in Rome. He decided to go back there at once, and of course Gioconda had to go with him. She would have to live with his mother and be looked after by her when he went away.

Their last week with us was spent in seeing the sights of Florence. Twice, without any warning, strange young men—friends of Alberto's—came in to work for us whilst Alberto and Gioconda wandered about the galleries. The housework was done sketchily in the early morning by Gioconda, and finished off by nurse and me. But who could grumble? We all felt—including Alberto—that his days must be made as gay as possible, for there was a pathetic sense of “perhaps-for-the-last-time” about his every hour. The day came when we had to part. They left the house both dressed in white, both wearing

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white shoes and stockings. Gioconda carried, as a touch of Florentine refinement, an embroidered handbag. With their small dark heads and their straight limbs they looked clean and sleek and entirely Roman. It hurt to see them go—it was as if a part of Rome went with them. They shook hands with us warmly, and then walked down the path towards the gate, followed by a street urchin who carried their much enlarged wardrobe in two borrowed gladstone bags.

It was not possible to think that sorrow could ever touch them; they went away like two laughing children, with no thought of anything that they were leaving and no thought of anything in front of them.

By the gate they waved their hands, and when the heavy wooden doors had shut behind them Alberto stopped to pull a cigarette from his pocket. When it was lighted, Gioconda put her arm through

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his, and Alberto with a kick sent the boy with the bags on in front. As no one was near to see, and it could not hurt his reputation as a dangerous young man, Alberto pulled down Gioconda's head and gave her a kiss on her mouth.

THE HOUR AHEAD

GENNARO had fixed the date of his leave with great care; but it was, all the same, a gamble. Would his child be born on one of those four precious days of leave? He hoped so; he had been lucky always, and he hoped to be lucky in this.

So as not to upset his wife, in case it should be impossible to get away, for leave was often stopped at the last moment, he had not written to tell her when he would be likely to be in Florence, and when at last the day came and all was safe, and he had his permit, it was useless to telegraph—a telegram would certainly take longer to arrive than he would.

Gennaro sat through the night in the crowded train, crushed between heavy, tired men and a broken window. The air blew on to his face, keeping him fresh

THE HOUR AHEAD

through a night of disturbed sleep, and he was thankful indeed for that hole in the glass. He sat through a wearisome morning, hardly noticing the others in the carriage, and, shutting his eyes, kept on thinking of the surprise and delight of Maria when he popped his head in at the door. Or she might hear his knock, he thought, and then push aside the curtain of their little sitting-room, the curtain she had embroidered herself and was so proud of, she would look out and see him. Perhaps, though, he would find her with the child in her arms; no news had come for a week, and the child might be already born. Putting his hand into his pocket to get a cigarette, he touched a letter and brought it out to look at. Of course it was Maria's last letter to him; he had forgotten that he had put it there; he thought he had tied it up with the rest of her letters in a bundle in his bag. Though he knew it by heart, he started to read it again. "Every day I hope you will come;

THE HOUR AHEAD

I am not afraid, but it would be sweet to have you near. I walk about and do the shopping as usual, but your mother now comes in to cook, and I have lots of time to sit and think of you—too much, perhaps, as I cannot help being frightened, knowing that you are in danger. Yesterday I had to pass by our little restaurant. I try never to go that way; it makes me ache to remember how proud we were of it, and of the tiny garden with the tables and chairs under the tree, and how we hoped that foreigners would like it and make it the fashion. We were so happy there, who could have thought it would only be for such a short time, and that this horrible war would come and part us. I am proud that they have made you a lieutenant; it won't make you love me less, will it, now that you see girls so much grander than me?" How young she was—why, she was not yet eighteen—and how pretty and strong and rosy! How could he think of any one else—absurd—

THE HOUR AHEAD

and at this moment, too. Of course, later on, if he didn't get shot—but what was the good of thinking of that, every one got shot in the long run—what was the good of making plans? He looked at the gray sky, and a dull fear crept over him; Lord, how awful to die; life was good, even the noise and beastliness of war was good, it was pure joy to feel alive. He got out the letter once more, and to change his thoughts, read it over again. Well, after all, he might be one of those who would know which side won, and if he did he would be pretty certain to be a captain by then. He got back to the train of his thoughts: Yes—then he would like Maria to wear a hat—she would have to—and she would have to learn gentle ways; but she was clever, she'd learn at once as soon as he could take her away to another place. As for his child, he would from the beginning have every advantage.

At five in the afternoon the creeping

THE HOUR AHEAD

train, over-full of restless men, that like ants crept in and out at any momentary stop, at last reached Florence. Gennaro walked quickly to the Cathedral, where he caught the Maremma tram just as it was starting. He was half disappointed not to find in it any one he knew; it was good to be back, and it would have been pleasant to exchange a cheery word with an acquaintance. What did the slush and rain or anything else matter? Florence was a splendid town, and he was glad indeed to be in it again. In the avenue by the Maremma he noticed a new economy in light—the tram slid under the dripping trees as though into a tunnel, and in the gloom, hardly seeing the turning where he had to stop, he pulled the bell and got out. As he swung round the corner he saw in front of the grocer's shop the vivid carbon light, and as he came under it a child stepped out of the shop, and, seeing him, with a muffled shriek, rushed back again.

THE HOUR AHEAD

“ What on earth is the matter with Elena ? Does she think I am a ghost ? ” Gennaro did not wish to lose any time, or he would have run into the shop after her to tease her, as he had often done. The wind made a dismal noise through a narrow gap in the houses, and with a shiver he looked ahead to try to get a glimpse of the lights in his mother’s window. All was black, but of course at that time she would be already with Maria, who hated to be alone after dark. As he looked, from round the corner came a yellow light, flickering and moving; he knew at once what it was, and almost unconsciously he made the sign against the evil eye. It was silly, no doubt, he thought, but no one cares to meet a funeral. Gennaro walked into the middle of the road, hoping to get in front of the men carrying torches, as he did not want to be obliged to wait till the long procession passed ; but at that moment the procession began to cross the street in front of the entrance to the church,

THE HOUR AHEAD

and his road was cut off. As he watched the man in charge of the black standard struggling to keep it from being battered down, the wind in gusts blew cold drops of rain on to his face. The priests and acolytes had hurried into the church, and behind the coffin he saw a long row of women, two by two, intent on trying to keep their candles from being blown out by the wind. Each hand sheltering a light looked like a drop of blood hanging on the darkness. Impatiently Gennaro moved closer, and as the coffin was carried into the middle of the road, through the smoke and glare of the torches, he recognised the four men supporting it. Then he stopped short, and with a sudden terror in his heart he strode up to the two women nearest to the coffin. His mother—Maria's mother. All power of thought left him; he could only shout in pain too great to bear, "Stop. Stop. Stop."

The four men, seeing that he began to

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tear at the pall, laid their burden carefully on to the ground. No one knew what to do nor what to say. Gennaro's mother fainted; his wife's mother stood in the middle of the road and, like the rest of the people huddled together clutching their candles, stared at him, dumb with surprise and horror. Gennaro knelt down in the mud, pulled away the black covering and tried to lift the coffin. "Help me to take her home—she must go home with me; help me to take her home." He struggled to put his arms round the coffin to lift it. The priest, hearing his cries, came quickly forward and saw at once what had happened. With tears falling down his face he put his hands on Gennaro's shoulders, "Poor boy, poor boy!" Then like a mother clutching a hurt child, he put his arms round the kneeling man, and, strong and young himself, he lifted him; half carrying, half dragging him across the pavement, he got him inside the church. "Come, my son,

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come and lay your cruel sorrow at the feet
of God."

The four men, without a word, lifted up
the body of the mother with her new-born
child, and with bowed heads followed the
priest into the church.

A WALK

WHEN you walk with a friend your absorption in him hides the passing eyes, trees are trees, bridges only bridges; but when you walk alone there is nothing between you and the secrets of the faces that you see, bridges have shapes ugly and pleasant, trees become many coloured mysteries—their branches stretch out in despair or wave with delight in the wind. To walk alone is to become part of all you see.

How deadening for any emotion either of pleasure or of pain life must be lived in a large hotel, drugged all the time by the murmuring of voices, by music, by gentle, deliberate movements all around—outward sensations taking the place of all inner life. Joy must give place to a hazy sense of pleasure, and sorrow become dulled into indifference. Can there be time for

A WALK

thought living in a crowd ? Do those who move with a rush, and live other people's lives as superficially as their own, know that they are only gray ghosts of what they are capable of being, or do they think because they are never still and speak too much that they live deeply ?

To-day I was more than usually conscious of this as I walked into Florence. Because of the noise of voices and passing carts, I could not hear my footsteps on the stones, and felt as though I were a shadow amongst people very much alive. At every step the crowd became more dense and more noisy. I tried to force myself to hear and to see nothing ; but it was not easy to go on being a ghost, for people who were walking, dawdling, all talking, some quarrelling, kept on knocking against me. Then I thought, " All we can ask of life, all that is good in life, is to understand and be understood by other human creatures ; life becomes richer inasmuch as we share

A WALK

experience.” And yet I dared not look up, for fear of seeing smug, contented faces; I dared not look down, for fear of finding the road dirty where they spat.

At a corner I stopped to look at a man who was selling cakes. He brushed the flies from his basket with a small wand to which were tied fresh laurel leaves. A little farther on I saw a vegetable shop. Flat, round baskets were filled with yellow gourds and thin white leeks; in a basket of spinach a black cat slept undisturbed by the grabbing hand that every now and then snatched the green from under her. I stood by the cat and thought, “Yes, it is pleasant to look at the green wand of the cake seller, and pleasant to look at the black cat and fresh, cool vegetables. Why though, try not to see the smug faces and the dirty road. Face life, do; face the spitting crowd without any silly shudders of disgust.” I pulled myself together and looked up and across the narrow road.

A WALK

A woman leading a blind man stood on the other side. The man was young, but his face was scarred and white and drawn, his mouth was half open, showing ugly teeth. The woman was certainly his mother, she held him by the arm guarding him. Fearful lest a cart should dash round the corner, she looked across the road carefully: her expression was all love and care and patience. Our eyes met, in a flash each knew of what the other was thinking, and I felt humbled before her. I walked on, happy in this new revelation of the mysterious power of love, and grateful to that sad old woman who for a second of time had allowed me to share her pain.

SEEN AND HEARD

GISELDA, in a dirty pink dress that showed the lines of her pretty figure and her bare arms, stood in the middle of the court-yard of a block of workmen's dwellings. It was a hot summer morning, and her mother had told her to go down to get a little air and at the same time to finish a stocking that she had begun to knit more than a month ago. The ball of cotton and the knitting needles lay at Giselda's feet, and she, lost to everything around her, was singing, "Good-bye, my love, good-bye," and heard nothing but her own voice. Her mother stopped working and looked out of the window, meaning to shout angrily at the girl; but as she put out her head she saw that two or three other women were leaning out of their windows listening. "Certainly," she thought, "the girl has a pleasant voice,

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but how she wastes her time singing or mooning about, arranging her dress or her hair.” When the song was finished one of the women spoke across the court, “Giselda sings like an angel, she ought to sing in church.”

“Don’t give her ideas,” shouted back her mother, “she’s vain enough as it is.”

Giselda with a shrug walked out of the wide funnel that made the entrance to the dwellings, crossed the road and began once more to sing, near the butcher’s shop.

“You see what you have all done by encouraging her,” screamed her mother; “she’s gone over again to Gilli’s to sing to him, hoping he’ll tell her what a lovely voice she has and how pretty she is. Why, the silly fool even gives her bits of meat when he likes a song. I’m coming down to give him a bit of my mind.”

There was a clatter of clogs on stone steps, and at last a dishevelled woman came out of one of the doors leading into the

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court. She picked up the knitting and went toward the main door.

"Don't be hard on her, Maria," a voice called out. "It's jolly cheery to hear her."

"Hard, indeed. You aren't a poor widow with a flighty girl of sixteen." With that she disappeared into the funnel.

Giselda by this time was standing in the butcher's narrow shop, in front of a cow cut in half and hanging from the roof by ropes tied to its legs. Her hands were folded in front of her, she held her small dark head straight and looked with deep blue eyes over the houses opposite at the sky beyond the roofs. The ruffled entrance of her mother made no impression on her; she pretended not to see her, and her mother, seeing that besides the butcher, a wine merchant and a dealer in plaited straw were staring with admiration at Giselda, waited impatiently till the song was finished. Then she burst into shrill anger.

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" You are a nice one, Gilli, to let her make an exhibition of herself. Who'll marry a girl that's been talked about as Giselda is beginning to be. Leave her alone, I say, and you, too, Conti, and Castini"—she turned angrily to the two other men. " You'd better all stop this tomfoolery about her voice."

The butcher, without answering, went on chopping at a piece of beef for a customer. Conti, the proprietor of the wineshop, fumbled in his pocket uneasily as if he wanted to speak, but was afraid of saying something he might regret. His red face got scarlet, but at last he found words.

" Well, Maria, as you are here, we'd better have it out now."

" Have out what? " Maria looked suspicious. Men were all beasts to her, and the future of her daughter was a grave anxiety.

Conti now spoke calmly. " We've heard Giselda sing ever since she was a child, but

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it's about a year ago now that we began to think she ought to be trained.

"Trained for what? Trained, indeed. What's that to do with you all? Hi! hi!" and the woman began to laugh hysterically.

Giselda's voice sounded hard and cold.

"Shut up, mother, do!"

The butcher broke in. "With a voice like that you aren't going to turn her into a cigar maker or send her to service; it's a voice for opera. Only last Monday a great singer from Milan heard her when he was passing, and he came into my shop to listen. He and I and a few of the neighbours had a talk about her then, and he said he'd come back to-day to speak about her again."

Maria was still laughing nervously.

"So you think he'll come. He wanted to get meat out of you on the days you aren't allowed to sell it, that's what he was thinking of."

By this time a small crowd of people

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stood outside the shop. Their loud voices, with the hum of passing trams, gave the little suburban street a busy, town-like air. Every one knew Giselda, every one was interested in the discussion, and every one had something to suggest. There was a lull; a tram stopped, a well-dressed man got out of it and pushed his way through the people standing on the pavement. When he saw him the butcher's face beamed; he bowed forward across his high counter.

"Here's the gentleman I was speaking of."

Maria became serious; fear for her child's future was now intensified into sheer terror. What could she do, a woman and alone? What did all this mean; why were all these men discussing Giselda and her voice? That it meant mischief she was certain, and putting out her hand she tried to drag Giselda away.

"Don't go," said the newcomer pleasantly; "we must have a quiet talk together."

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A strong west wind brought the boom of the twelve o'clock cannon down the street.

Gilli put down his chopper. "I can shut up shop now. Let's go into the room at the back and talk there."

Maria, pulled by Giselda, pushed by the well-dressed stranger and a few others, found herself in the gloom of the back parlour. Gilli's wife opened half a shutter, and the sight of her moving about busy with everyday actions gave Maria a little courage. In the meantime Gilli, waving away the rest of the people, pulled down the iron door of the shop, that with a rasping sound clattered on to the ground.

The stranger held a chair ready for Maria, who, still dazed and fearful, sat down on it, and to calm herself rested her elbows on the table. Giselda sat upon the only arm-chair in the room, and as many of the others as could find chairs huddled together round the table. The rest stood.

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The wine merchant, richer than the others, felt it his right to be spokesman ; he began to clear his throat, and as he was spitting, Giselda, with a jerk, got up and said, looking at her mother,—

“ All there is to be said, mother, is this. Gilli, Conti, Castini, and a hundred or so of our neighbours have put up enough money to get me trained for opera in Milan, and this gentleman”—she pointed to the smiling stranger—“ is going to see that I get a first-rate teacher.”

Maria’s face had never any colour, but she now looked like one dying and in pain. She did not say a word, but stared at her daughter. Gilli opened the glass windows of a cupboard behind her, took out a bottle of vermouth, and handed her some of it in a glass. Maria pushed away his arm and spilled the vermouth on to the floor. There was an uncomfortable silence, the only sound the creaking of the cupboard door as Gilli locked the wine up again.

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Maria spoke first. "If your father were alive, Giselda, you would not have dared even to think of all this. It isn't a life for any honest girl."

Giselda got up and went close to her mother. "Look here, mother, I can't look at it as you do. As long as I can remember, the people here have always said to me—when you weren't there, of course—that I must sing one day on the stage; and, after all, it's to be opera, serious opera."

"But I can't let you go to Milan." Maria grasped at this. To her it seemed an enormity so great to let a girl go away from her mother, that she felt certain that in this, at least, all would agree with her.

The stranger was speaking again in his firm and gentle voice, very different from the other voices around her. Maria listened in spite of herself. "You must not be so upset. Your girl need not go to Milan

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if you feel as you do about that. There are two or three good teachers in Florence, and I will give the committee their names."

A little colour came into Maria's face. Committee—Giselda—Opera. Good God! what had her motherhood brought her. She sat dazed whilst arrangements were made. Every now and then the stranger would turn to her to explain something or to ask her advice; Giselda, however, and the people she knew paid no more attention to her, and of this she was glad. The stranger's courtesy flustered her and left her unable to fight for her child in the only way she knew—by loud words and desperate gesticulations. "Everything," said the stranger, "was for her to decide"; and yet there they were, arranging Giselda's fate, speaking of sums of money that to her meant a fortune, and she was unable to put in a word. When at last all was settled, and she walked back to her room

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with Giselda, she felt as if the woman who had followed her girl into the butcher's shop earlier in the morning had been strangled and lay with bulging eyes and bloated tongue, unable any longer to fight or say a word.

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Daily Giselda went to her lesson, and daily she became a person of greater importance to her neighbours in the Maremma—and to herself. The Maremma lies between the river and the small hills, which are covered with villas, their gardens and fields, and because of this, is narrow and over-crowded, the town tumbling into the country through a space like the neck of a bottle. It is not possible for any one here to pass unnoticed, and any day as Giselda waited for the tram she was certain to be seen by more than half the people who were helping to get her trained for opera. More than once she had overheard a man saying to a stranger: “I’ve put money on

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that girl; she's going to be a second Patti. You'll see, the Marennia will be spoken of before long all over the world."

All this pride in her would have been an incentive for her to work hard had Giselda not been cursed with a lazy nature. She was quite unable to concentrate her thoughts, and little by little her teacher began to lose patience. One day he took her by the shoulder and pushed her out of the room. "You've a lovely voice and a stupid head. I can't teach you. You must go to some one who has more patience."

Giselda came back that day rather frightened, but not at all discouraged. After all, he had said her voice was lovely, and that was the chief thing. Some one else could teach her if he could not.

The committee for the training of Giselda met, and after much noisy talk it was decided that Conti should go and see her teacher and ask his advice about another

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master. From that interview Conti returned anything but pleased. He sent for Giselda and talked to her loudly and angrily, upbraiding her for her laziness, and drawing at the same time into his shop a crowd of inquisitive people. Giselda, in tears, ran home. The crowd stopped to hear what the teacher had said.

"She hasn't lost her voice, has she?" asked half a dozen curious voices. "It'd be a cruel blow for the Marenna."

A fisherman grumbled. "It'd be a blow for me losing twenty lire."

"You'd not be the only one to lose money," screeched a perky-faced woman.

Here Conti's voice sounded above the hubbub. "It's no good talking as if all was black. The girl's voice is right enough —she'll buck up a bit now that I've given her a good fright." In the midst of the discussion and grumbling Giselda's mother pushed her way into the shop.

"Look here, people, leave my girl alone.

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You'll not lose your money, I'll be bound,
and I won't have her made miserable."

Her violence seemed to calm the crowd,
and soon each went about his business.

In a few days Giselda had recovered
her spirits, and as she walked towards the
tram, tall, full-breasted, and healthy, many
admiring eyes followed her. "She's fine,
that girl," said a dustman as she passed,
"look at her figure."

His friend eyed Giselda with a leer.
"You're right; there isn't another like her
in Florence. Lord, what a back!"

Those who had put money on Giselda's
voice quickly recovered their belief in her.
Looking at her moving about, it was not
possible to think of disappointment in
connection with her; she moved slowly,
calmly, like a ship in full sail—the embodi-
ment of youthful triumph. Her fame
spread to the chief parts of the town, and
a photographer came to take a picture of
her and of the main street of the Maremma

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for one of the Florentine papers. This was fame indeed for a place bare of antiquities, and one that had not even a stone pavement by the river's side, and every man, woman and child hoped from that time that Giselda would bring them glory not to be equalled by any other part of the town.

Another God-given summer was over, and on a wet autumn afternoon when mists hung over Florence, Giselda was seen going into Gilli's shop with her new master. He looked serious and preoccupied; Giselda was gloomily dabbing at her eyes with a wet handkerchief. Quickly the word went round, and the shop became crowded. Gilli's wife, in answer to questions, said curtly that her husband was in the back room, talking to the professor of music. Soon Gilli himself came into the shop, and, seeing the people, he called out the names of the few most important men there, then walked back into the room followed by these men, and as many others as could

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push in after him. The door had to be left open.

Gilli spoke to the teacher. "Perhaps you will explain to them."

The professor of music turned to the men nearest him,—

"I can say all there is to say in a few words. My pupil has a good voice—there is no question about that—but I do not think she has enough talent to sing in opera, and I feel I ought to say so at once." He was going on speaking, but an angry murmur stopped him.

"Vile girl, deceiving us."

"Lazy slut, that's what she is. I don't believe she ever meant to learn."

"What about our money?"

At last, after Gilli had called out loudly three times, "The professor has a plan by which you will not lose your money," they quieted down.

The professor, cross and bored, began to speak again. "Her voice is good, but

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she has no talent for music. She might, however, do very well in a theatre of variety."

"That's not what we were told to expect."

"Music halls, indeed ! Why, lots of girls from here have sung in those."

"Then she's got no voice."

"What a sell ! "

In the midst of a babel of angry remarks the professor turned to Gilli.

"I can do nothing here; you'd better talk it out with them. She could sing in variety at once, and perhaps they'll get back their money."

After the professor had left, pushing away those in the crowd who tried to ask him questions, Gilli explained to the waiting people that they need not be upset about their money ; Giselda would certainly do very well, even if she did not sing in opera.

All this time Giselda, sullen and frightened, stood by the window without saying a

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word. The loud talking went on, but it was less excited, though still noisy. It seemed as if no one could possibly hear his neighbour, and yet slowly order came, as if the argument of one, and perhaps not one with the loudest voice, had pierced the brain of the lot.

A fisherman pushed himself forward. "We don't want to be unkind to the girl; let her get an engagement at the Follies, and see if she can pay back her friends." And it was thus that Giselda began to hunt for introductions to managers of music halls and thus that the glory that was Giselda passed away for ever. The women began to shrug their shoulders when they saw her, and where before Giselda had felt that they had liked to see her in her silk stockings and pretty dresses, it was now no secret that they thought she got them in a way that meant little credit to her or to the Marenna, and when they did not hint at lovers, they frankly spoke

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as if they had been forced to pay for her extravagances. Giselda's life was not pleasant, and the violent partisanship of her distracted mother only made quarrels more frequent and more disagreeable.

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The Maremma patronised opera more than theatres of variety, but on the morning of the first appearance of Giselda knots of people gathered together outside the small shops and talked about the event.

"Are you going to the Follies to see her?" said one man to another.

"No, why should I? That girl's a fraud, with all her talk of being a second Patti."

Till well on in the afternoon this was how most of the people felt and talked. When the lights were lit and a few glasses of wine had been drunk, the point of view changed.

"What if we all go and cram the Follies

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and have at least some fun, even if we stand to lose our money?"
• • • • •

The mordant wit of the youths of the Marennna kept a crowd of soldiers laughing till the doors were opened, when the Marennites surged in, filling all the cheaper parts of the house. They waited with little patience through five turns, whispering amongst themselves, and doing their best to distract and upset the performers. At last the curtain was raised on Giselda. . . . Gold clad, almost naked, and strangely beautiful, she stood before those who had known her, a vision of luxury remote from anything that touched their lives. Gazing astonished at her loveliness the Marennites felt one thing and one thing only—this was what they had made of her, she who was to have brought honour to the Marennna —this, a toy for the rich, and something now for ever out of their grasp. With a hoarse shout and a laugh, a young tramway

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driver voiced the silent irony of the crowd,—

“Here’s Patti of the Maremma.”

For a second the girl on the stage reeled, and then, mercifully for her, all her gutter-bred youth came to her help, and she looked up and faced her audience with a kick and a grin. Hardly was her song finished when a voice yelled,—

“As I’ve put my money on you, be kind. What about supper to-night?”

A roar of delight from the males of the Maremma, and the women, ever ready to bait one whom they judge to be veiled in the mystery of illicit love, joined loudly in the laugh. A deep, drunken voice was heard above every sound,—

“You might pay us all back like that—I’ve no objection.”

The curtain was sharply lowered, and before the next turn could come on many of Giselda’s patrons had to be thrown out of the theatre. Angry and violent, shouting

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abuse right and left, Giselda ran back to her dressing-room. A sense of injustice bit into her ; she had not started the idea of singing in opera, her neighbours had thought of it, they had hoped to get money and glory through her. For her it would have been enough, it was enough, to sing as she had to-night, in the first music-hall in Florence. But she had had her success, and in spite of them—they were not the only people there—even at that moment cards and flowers were being handed to her through the door. She would not let herself be any longer at the mercy of rabble—let them lose their filthy money, grasping beasts. How could she know that they had lost through her something far more precious than money, and that their heckling sarcasm came partly from fury for having let themselves succumb to an ideal, a pride in their district which was to have been embodied in her fame.

Giselda looked at herself in the glass and

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viciously pulled her new hat on to her head. No, she would never dare to walk down the Maremma in a hat, but she would never, never walk down the Maremma again....

The door opened. A tall, graceful young man stood in front of her.

"Look here, Giselda, you aren't going on any longer with your nonsense of virtue. Your friends pretty well did for you. Eh! But the stalls and the boxes know a good thing when they see one—sometimes." He went closer to the girl and put his long fingers round the column of her neck. "I've got a jolly little supper ready for you. Now come!"

THE HEN

IT had rained for many days, a steady downpour; water splashed from the spout under the roof on to the pavement below. The old woman's window was wide open, and as she lay dying she listened to the sound of the tumbling water. For a long time it soothed her as a song might soothe, but suddenly she opened her eyes, and, seeing the waiting people, she remembered why they were there—they were waiting for her to die. A flicker of life came back to her body, a wish to show that she was still mistress of her house. She called out clearly in spite of her eighty years and her illness,—

“ Tell Giovanni to see about mending that spout; this rain will crumble the roof on to my head.”

A woman who stood near to the door

THE HEN

went out. In half an hour or so there was the sound of a ladder scraping against the wall, a rasping noise of old tin, a louder splash of water on to the pavement, more rasping sounds, but the water went on dripping as before. The ladder was left propped against the wall, and a man came through the long, open window. He took off his wet coat, put it on to the back of a chair near to the open fire, then sat down and took his pipe out of his pocket.

The dying woman breathed heavily, her eyes were again closed. A few moments passed ; she opened her eyes and lifted her right hand. Her niece, a gray-haired, stout woman in a dark cotton dress with a black apron tied round her waist, leant over her.

“ What do you want, aunt ? ” she asked listlessly.

‘ I am thirsty ; give me wine, Gina, the good wine from the cellar.’

The stout woman waddled slowly to the door. In the passage outside was another



LADY OF
CALIFORNIA

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THE HEN

door with stone steps leading to the cellar. She looked down and was just going to call her daughter to go and fetch the wine when, murmuring to herself, "She's such a fool, she's certain to get the best"—she started carefully to go down. In a few minutes she was up again, panting for breath, and as she walked towards the old woman's room she gulped down a drink from the bottle and dried her mouth with her black apron. In a corner cupboard of the bedroom she found a glass and poured out the red wine. After that she beckoned to her daughter, a dull-faced, heavy-limbed girl, and between them they dragged the dying woman higher up in the bed and held the glass to her mouth. But hardly had the wine touched her lips when her expression changed.

"Take it away, take it away; you have given me bad wine. I know you; you want to keep the best for yourselves."

Worn out with the effort of her anger,

THE HEN

she fell back on to the pillow. Her niece turned round and with a movement of her arms shrugged her shoulders, "She doesn't know what she says." Two women standing by the fire nodded, "No, no, she doesn't know what she says." But when they drank the rest of the bottle they wished that the fat woman had brought up the better wine, and when the man, her husband, went out of the room to fetch the priest, they whispered to each other, "Gina takes care of everything now that she thinks it will all soon be hers; she was free enough with the good wine before."

The rain stopped at last, the clattering of the water from the roof pipes turned into a gentle, uncertain dropping. A hen clucked near to the window, it had come into the room in search of crumbs; by the fire it found a piece of bread, swallowed it, and then ran close to the bed. "Cluck! cluck!" The old woman stirred. "I shall not live till Christmas," she sighed, her trembling

THE HEN

fingers rumpling the bed-clothes. She called to her niece, "Gina," she went on, "take the hen and kill her and cook her, quick, quick; I am hungry." The fat woman stood, stolid and gloomy, by the bed. The old woman looked at her again. "Go, go, Gina!" Gina's daughter groaned. "How she wanders, poor thing." Her father, who had seen the priest, now came back into the room. The old woman saw him, "Giovanni, tell Gina to go and cook the hen; tell her to be quick—I am hungry." The man looked at his wife as if to ask her what he should do.

"She wanders, she wanders, she doesn't know what she says," was her answer.

By the fireside the man once again took out his pipe. There was a long silence. Later, a little girl followed her mother into the room and drove the clucking hen out of the window. The old woman in the bed called out, "Gina, is the hen cooked yet?" Gina looked at the woman who

THE HEN

had just come in, “What strange fancies the dying have!”

“Maybe she really is hungry; why don’t you cook the hen for her?” suggested the new-comer, a handsome, dark young woman, large with child, as she looked with lazy sympathy towards the bed.

“Good heavens! Can’t you see she will not last long—and, besides, the priest is coming.”

The child ran out of the window, followed by her mother. By the fire the two neighbours whispered hoarsely. “Who will have this house and the field; there may be money, too, put away somewhere?”

“Gina thinks she will have it all, she already gives herself the airs of the owner here.”

“She may leave something to you; you always helped her with the half-yearly wash.”

“And you, why not, you gave her fresh eggs often enough.”

“She would not keep fowls; she said they ate too much.”

THE HEN

"No, she never had one till she got this to fatten up for Christmas."

The man knocked his pipe out on the stone floor, and then moved closer to the whispering women. "Who knows what she'll do with her money? Gina is not her only niece, and there are those cousins, too, at Arezzo."

"Well, Giovanni," they laughed huskily, "if Gina gets it you will be master here."

"Who knows! Everything may go to the priests. When I married Gina the old 'un said to me, 'You aren't marrying my niece for her looks; she is as ugly as a sour apple. Don't you count too much on my money. She may get it and she may not; you will see when the time comes.'"

The bell of the church half a mile away rang for a moment, then stopped.

"That is the priest coming," said one of the women.

The dull-eyed girl went out, got a broom, and came back to sweep the floor. A moan

THE HEN

came from the bed, "I am hungry, you have given me nothing to eat for hours, isn't that hen cooked yet?" She tried to pull herself up in the bed. "Why do you sweep the floor, girl? Go and see that the hen doesn't get burnt."

The fat woman, calling out to her daughter sharply to go on sweeping, hurried into the kitchen. There she took a piece of bread, soaked it in wine, and brought it in on a plate. "Here is bread for you, it is soft," she said coaxingly, "soaked in wine." Her aunt shook her head. "No, no, I will wait for the hen."

There was a murmur outside of a voice speaking steadily; the sound came nearer. Disturbed and frightened by the noise the hen flew noisily into the room; the dying eyes saw her and looked puzzled, "I am waiting, Gina, I am waiting."

The man walked into the kitchen and opened the door leading to the street. Outside stood the priest under a white satin

THE HEN

umbrella, held over him by a boy; behind him were two very old men and a few women and children; they had followed the priest from the church, and now stood waiting by the door with solemn, important, inquisitive faces. The priest walked into the bedroom, followed by the boy carrying the folded umbrella; the women in the room knelt down; the man came in, kicked the hen out of the window, shut the window, and then knelt down beside the door.

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A few hours later, towards evening, the old woman died. Gina woke from a doze when she called out for the last time, "I am hungry; have you cooked the hen?"

After that she breathed with great difficulty twice and then lay still.

Long before dawn Gina and her daughter were awake and busy, and before any neighbour was likely to come in, all was ready. They had put a clean white sheet upon the bed, and upon it, dressed in her

THE HEN

best black clothes, lay the old woman. Her head, covered with a piece of frayed black lace, rested on a coarse linen pillow edged with rough embroidery; her small face looked older even than in life, her long, pointed chin made shadows on her face, her eyes had sunk far back into their sockets. Below her full, folded skirts her feet, in black stockings, looked small and pathetic, though death was, here, just and happy—a long, dreary life done with; a tired old woman, unwept, asleep, and at peace.

Huddled up on a hard chair the man slept noisily; his daughter was rummaging in a drawer for a piece of silk she had once seen the old woman put there. The stout woman blew hard at the dying embers, then went to fetch a saucepan hanging on the wall, filled it with water and put it on the fire. She went out of the room. When she came back she had the body of the hen in one hand and was quickly plucking out

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the feathers with the other. The girl looked up sleepily as her mother came in.

“What a time we have had,” said the woman briskly; “we shall all be glad of a bit of something to eat.”

FLOODS

WHEN last I went to see her in her house that stands square on the hill, and looks as if a bird-cage filled with sunshine and flowers hung from the rock above, I did not think that, as a friend, I should not see her again.

It was late in the afternoon on a cold day in March. Half-way up the hill to Fiesole I turned back. Over Florence the sky was dark, but far away the snow-covered Apennines blazed white in the blue. Near to where I stood, the reflection of the setting sun, hidden from the valleys by clouds, turned every leaf and dried branch, even the earth itself, into a red-purple. Here and there a small oak tree with all the dead leaves still clinging to the branches, flamed like the burning bush that hid the eyes of God.

FLOODS

Away on the plain—a mirror of light
in the rising mist—floods covered the fields.
A new lake filled the valley of the Arno.

As I turned the corner I thought that
every house was on fire, for every window
blazed back the last red glow of the sun.

The floods have gone. The river once
more runs between its banks. From its
summer height the sun shines on town and
hill and valley.

There are friendships, like the overflow
of rivers, that make wide but shallow lakes,
and like them, too, they vanish and leave
no trace.

INCIPIT VITA NOVA

IT is difficult to believe that in this world full of people there are many who are alone. They have friends, but no near relations, and when sorrow or illness comes to them few care enough to ask if they are alive or dead. They slip away from the places that knew them and are forgotten.

Joan Melvil had lost her mother at the age of two, and ever since then had lived in Italy with her father, in a villa near Florence. Just before the war Joan and her father had gone to England, but almost as soon as they got there he died, and Joan, who knew few people, was left very much alone. When the war started she went at once to work at a hospital in London, and, before long, was sent to France. There she met a young soldier and married him, and felt that they were lucky in having a

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few days together before he had to return to the front. He was killed soon after he had got back to the trenches.

From despair and shock Joan became ill and was unable to go on with her work. As soon as she could decide anything at all about her future she made up her mind to go back to Italy, and started for Florence early in the year. The house she had lived in with her father was still empty, and the woman—Assunta—who had been their cook, was looking after it. Joan took a lease of the house at once, keeping Assunta as her servant.

Many years ago the house had been a farm, and was simply and strongly built on two floors; the ground floor, chiefly arches open to the air and sun, where once farm carts had been kept, was now filled with lemon trees, whilst upstairs were six large rooms, and from the largest, a sitting-room, two windows opened on to a wide, covered terrace.

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The effort of the journey and the details of taking over the house roused Joan for a few hours from her apathy of misery. As soon as she had unpacked a few of her books and clothes she went out and sat on the terrace. She looked down at the untidy little garden, almost a part of the field, as here and there olive trees grew close to the house, and then at a clump of poplars that made a small wood on her left. Looking at the leafless branches, Joan thought, "It is winter everywhere, all is desolate and bare." Round her she seemed to find the desolation that was her own life, and realised that in her desire to go back to Italy there had been, perhaps, a hope of sunshine and blue skies. The wind was cold, but she sat on, watching the branches of olives, now green, now gray, as the wind moved them; she did not want to go into the house for fear of being shut as in a prison with her thoughts; out of doors, looking at the moving clouds and listening to the sound

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of the wind, she felt closer to her lost lover, but indoors, surrounded by familiar objects, the cupboards and tables she had known as a child, she was overwhelmed by their rigid lines, for they seemed to watch her in a mute protest at the changing spirit within her.

For two or three weeks Joan had felt very ill. She had thought it was only the physical reaction of her mental state, but slowly it dawned on her that even what was left to her of hope had to be paid for with discomfort and pain. Every day she felt worse, and every day she found it more difficult to eat, till at last her mental torture was altogether clouded by the physical discomfort of sickness. When she had fainted many times from weakness, Assunta insisted on fetching the doctor who had known Joan since her childhood. He came bustling into the room.

“Why, dear me, Joan, what’s the matter? I didn’t know you were here. I thought

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you were still in England with your father."

Joan was too weak even to try to tell him of all that had happened to her since they had last met; but Assunta made him sit down and at once told him of the death of Joan's father, and of her marriage, and her loss. Joan waited, and then, to stop the torrent of sympathetic words from the doctor, she put out her hand.

"Please, please give me something, anything, to stop this horrible sickness."

The doctor looked more cheerful suddenly, but being Italian and tactful, he felt it would only agitate Joan if he said anything more than was necessary about her health. He asked a few questions, and then said, "I can do very little, I am afraid; you must lie flat and try to keep up your strength. Try to think of the child that is coming to help you in your sorrow."

"Yes, yes, that is what I always tell her, poor lamb," broke in Assunta; "but she

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is too unhappy to think of anything but her loss."

Joan, who had not cried for days, and would have thought it impossible that she should ever cry in front of another person, suddenly began to sob. The doctor held her hand and tried to calm her.

"It is useless for me to tell you that sorrow passes, those who suffer know that it is eternal, but you must think of the child. Have you no friends who could come to you? You are too much alone, I am certain."

Joan stopped crying. "I don't want to see any one. It would make any one gloomy to be near me. And I can feel nothing about the child, nothing—nothing. It is just an illness suffering in this horrible way, and I cannot believe it can be more than that."

Assunta sat down and began to cry loudly, so that no one should think she lacked sympathy. Joan, upset by the noise she

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made, pulled herself together, and outwardly, at least, was calm once more. The doctor, after a few minutes, took up his hat. "Be brave, try not to think too much; but if you can't help it, remember you are one of many who are alone and suffering in the same way."

In the night Joan tried to think of his words, "You are one of many." Was it possible that any other creature's heart could ache as hers ached with a pain that like a corrosive poison ate the interest out of life; could any one go on living caring for nothing at all, not sunlight nor darkness, and feeling only a desperate sense of loss? And the child . . . why did the child mean nothing to her? She could not think of it as something of her love and herself. She suffered an annoying, brain-destroying illness, and they told her it meant that she would have a child; but how was it possible for her to give birth to a live, healthy child. What live thing could grow from such desolation

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of misery and from a man that was dead?

Through a few wet and cold weeks Joan had to stop in bed; but at the end of March the days began to get warmer, and spring, a wakeful spring that calls even through the wet and cold of a Florentine winter, at last drove winter away. The day came, too, when Joan felt better, when she began to be free of the exasperation of sickness, and it was as if a heavy load had been taken off her brain. The sun was shining. She made a great effort to get up, and crept to the window to look out. Below her the wall was mauve with wistaria; it twisted itself on to the roof above her and fell, a tapestry of leafless flowers, close to the window, almost covering it. Joan looked through it at the distant cathedral and at the tower, white against the blue sky, and suddenly as she looked she felt as if she had changed back into the girl she had

INCIPIT VITA NOVA

been, less compressed into a strange, unpleasant self and more a part of all that surrounded her.

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In a few days she was able to dress, and could walk without help from the garden into the fields. It was midday, and no one was working. Joan was glad, for she was shy of her weakness. Assunta, who had come out with her, wanted to stop, but Joan begged her to go back to the house.

“ I shall be all right, and if I fall it will only be on to the grass, so do go back, there’s a dear; I am sure you are longing to be in the kitchen.”

Joan was weaker than she had thought, but she walked on and up a grass path from where she could see the snow-capped Carrara mountains and the smaller hills purple in the sun. She sat down on a ledge of grass between rows of broad beans and artichokes, and smiled, glad to

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be out of doors, glad to feel the air on her face.

Tiny, woolly, white clouds, very high up, moved slowly on the sky. Far away and below her were the clump of poplars, the hazy green of their budding leaves imprisoning a deeper blue of the sky; close by her the small, inquisitive black eyes on the white flower of the bean looked at her through green leaves; the grass she sat on was covered with large daisies pink-tipped; out of the brown earth the artichokes grew a gray-green, and everywhere, like strong ropes knotted, vines climbed over gnarled mulberry trees, their soft new leaves edged with a line of red. Farther away green corn had begun to burst out of the ground, and behind her long green lines marked the new peas still without the dead branches that later on would be put there to support them. Overhead, like a geometric puzzle between the sky and her, stretched branches of fig trees, leaf, fruit, and blossom in the

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fruit, bursting together out of the same firm, gray stems; shadows of these branches and of the still, arid branches of walnut trees fell on the red-brown earth and on to the vivid green of vegetables; wherever she looked, amidst all this, was the white flower of the pear, the silver gray of olives. All was new and fresh and strong with the force of growing life; even the air was alive and singing.

Joan slid from the grass and crept close to the upturned ground, and then, as if at the touch of naked earth, all her youth rose up in her veins to the knowledge that her body held life, that she was in truth like the earth itself. She lay quietly thinking, “Out of the earth grow trees and plants, and out of her, a little clod of earth, would grow what is even more wonderful than trees and flowers are.”

Her head on the grass, her body on the earth, she rested with this one thought in her mind—she had become a part of life,

INCIPIT VITA NOVA

a part of growth, a part of creation. And for the first time since her loss she thought with hope of the future.

There was silence for a long time, the silence of midday, broken only once by the tingling bells of a wine cart passing on the road below. Joan listened till their sound was as faint as the sound of passing bells in a dream, then like a child she fell into a sound and healthy sleep.

TO TRAVELLERS OF ALL TIME

FLORENCE holds the climate of all countries in her hills and in her plains: misty days of soft rain, Scotch days, windy days of high, eastern table-lands, warm, enervating days of islands in the Pacific, days of dry, burning sunshine—desert days. All this is the charm of Florence, the changing temperature, the changing climate that makes of the sky and hills ever new surroundings.

Rain in the mountains, and a great river comes roaring through the town; when the rain stops, the water as quickly as it came rushes away, leaving new rubble islands in the stream. Every time that I see a new island I am on a voyage of discovery, tied to one place I can still journey to other lands. Low-hung clouds make new mountains in the sky—Monte Morello becomes the smaller sister of a Himalayan

TO TRAVELLERS OF ALL TIME

giant towering above it. The island, the cloud-mountain, the water, pearl-coloured and still, and far away countries seen as in a mirage, are close to me again—countries known, countries dreamt of, countries read about. When the snow covers the far off mountains and a mist hides the valleys, I sit in the boat with Franklin and watch with him the mountains of ice part from their rock mother and crash into the sea—purple, green and gold. When the wind blows from the east and all who walk shiver, I have known the winds of Siberia in places nearer it than this, and huts that have ice-blocks for windows, ice-blocks instead of the alabaster of San Miniato. No! I will not be imprisoned by Florence, not by her beauty, not by her history; I can, in spite of her and helped by her, look westward and see from the Quantock Hills, through a row of ancient beeches, the Bristol Channel and the ships of the men of the west sailing away to the unknown. On hot summer

TO TRAVELLERS OF ALL TIME

afternoons I can lie dreaming of the south and of those who have pushed through jungle and fever swamp to find strange beasts sleeping in their lair ; live with Park, his hope that every bend of the river would show him the belching mouth of the Niger staining the green waters of the sea ; more south still, and Scott and his companions.

Great north, great south, great east, great west, each with its history of discovery and courage, each with its mountain and river and road on which men have sought what is always hidden in the bend of the road, in the mist of the sea ! Barentz, Dampier, Vasco da Gama, Columbus ! Travellers, what have you gone out to find ? New lands, buried cities, gold ? What reason did you give to those who need a reason for everything ? Gold was reason enough to them for whatever you might have done ; but when you lay under the sun or rain and knew that imprisoning walls were far away, you listened for the

TO TRAVELLERS OF ALL TIME

voice of the wind, the song of the rain, the cry of a strange bird, and for you there was no further reason than this for being there; you asked for nothing more than that with the dawn your tent should be ready and packed, your eyes turned towards another resting-place.

Travellers, you who can journey no more and you who have still the dust of the desert in your mouth, the ice of the north wind in your veins, I owe you thanks. For many years here, often alone, I have not been crushed by the narrowness of a small town; you have let me share your journeys, your privations, your dangers, and your joy, your large humanity has kept hope alive in my heart.

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